

LAG BAOMER - SELFLESSNESS

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari

The plague in which the 24,000 disciples of Rabbi Akiva died and its cessation on Lag Ba Omer [Talmud Bavli, 62b] is explained by the nature of the period of Sefirat HaOmer (counting of the Omer) in which it occurred and the significance of this day. So too, we will understand the Talmudic explanation that they died as a punishment for not giving each other proper respect, even though this is not a sin for which there is a death penalty, either by a human bet din (religious tribunal) or at the hand of Heaven.

Sefirat Ha Omer is meant to enable us to purify the animal characteristics and make them holy, a human yearning and trait beyond the perspectives of rational thought and intelligence. In order to do this, we are required to negate the 'yesh', the essence of our individuality. The sacrifice itself is of barley, primarily food for animals in contrast to wheat. Furthermore, the use of the products of the new harvest [Chodosh] is only permitted after the bringing of the omer. This is an acknowledgement of the Divine source of material wealth, even though such wealth is morally and legally the property of the human owner.

The Omer was brought not on Pesach itself but rather on the first day of Chol HaMoed. After all, the Chag by its very nature brings the subjection of all our human desires and mental or physical needs to the service of HaShem. It needed to be brought on Chol HaMoed in which there is partial satisfaction of our material and physical needs and wants, to demonstrate the sanctification and elevation of these needs and desires.

We know that the primary effect of counting the omer is till its 33rd day [Lag Ba Omer] when the major influence is that of Pesach with its redemption from slavery and physical hardship; after this the orientation is towards Shavuot and the spirituality of Matan Torah. Both Pesach and Shavuot flow from the importance of ' klall Yisrael'. 'A priori, the korban pesach should not be by the individual' [Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Korban Pesach, chapter 2, halakhah 2], and Omer, has its roots in 'ingathering.'

On Shavouot, all the souls gathered together. So the appropriate preparation for Shavout is to make all our material possessions and our very bodies holy, even beyond the instructions of our minds. In consequence of our preparation, an abundance of great light and Torah are poured out over us on Shavout. The efforts made during this first period of sefirah, enable everyone to negate part of their own personal value and abilities, the spiritual and material 'yesh', and thereby to perceive and accept those of others. Thereby we are able to come to the unity and the formation of a single

personality that are a prerequisite for receiving Torah. Remember, that the Torah[Shmot, 19:2] uses the singular form to describe the encampment at the foot of Sinai on Shavuot. Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk , taught that ' I stood between you and G-d', [Moshe's description of Sinai, - Devarim,5:5], means that it is the individual ' I 'that stands between us and G-d.

The disciples of Rabbi Akiva were according to the Zohar, given the task of redeeming the sin of the tribe of Shimon and its Nasi, Zimri at Shittim for which 24,000 died. The disciples needed to negate their own individual value and give honor to that of others in order to achieve this, as this was actually the cause of the sinning. Since they were unable to achieve such negation, they failed to redeem the sin that caused death and therefore they too had to die.

(Shem Mi Shmuel, Sefirat Ha Omer, Pesach Haggadah; Emor, 5671,Lag Ba Omer. For a fuller discussion of the sin at Shittim, see Shem Mi Shmuel, Balak, 5679)

Copyright © 2002 by Rabbi Meir Tamari and Project Genesis, Inc.

Dr. Tamari is a renowned economist, Jewish scholar, and founder of the Center For Business Ethics (www.besr.org) in Jerusalem.